

MJB 95 Matthew Sitman transcript

Julia: [00:00:00] I'm here with Matthew Sitman, a Catholic writer in New York City, and the co-host of the Know Your Enemy Podcast, A Guide to the Political right hosted by two leftists prior to writing and podcasting full-time. Matt was associate editor of Commonweal Magazine for six years. Matt, welcome to Message Jesus Business.

Matt: Thank you so much for having me. I've been, uh, really looking forward to this.

Julia: Yeah, me too. 'cause there's so much that we can explore together. One of the things that you and I have in common I'm aware of is we both come from rural America and now you're living in New York City. I lived in Chicago for a while.

I'm kind of back to semi rural lacrosse, Wisconsin Uhhuh. Here you are now a full-time podcaster, which is living the dream for many folks out there. I,

Matt: I know it's uh, uh, you know, sometimes. I laugh about being a podcaster, you know, especially living in New York, but I say I don't live in Brooklyn. I'm not a Brooklyn podcaster, [00:01:00] but, uh, it, I am living the dream and I'm excited to talk with you about messy Jesus stuff.

Julia: Sure. Great. So how did you become. This guy. How did you come from rural Pennsylvania to New York City? Do I understand this correctly? You grew up sort of a conservative evangelical Bible-based Christian, but then also converted like liberal Catholic, you know? Uh, yes. Urban, you know, like, it's like so many mass conversions happened here and some of it.

In public. Mm-hmm. Um, or at least you're a public figure now.

Matt: Mm-hmm.

Julia: I know, uh, some pieces of the story, but I'd love to hear you share how this conversion occurred for you.

Matt: Sure. You know, it's funny, I was thinking, listening to you, uh, one of my friends, someone I edited Commonweal, Rita Ferone. One time I was having dinner with her and I said I was a.

To the Catholic church and she said, no, Matt, you were received into the Catholic church. You were a Christian already. Uh, yeah. And so I, [00:02:00] uh, I think of, you know, Rita's voice, those words are in my ear all the time, but I grew up in a small town in central Pennsylvania called Bellwood, pretty much right in the middle of the state, very conservative area.

I often like to point out that I think it was in 2020, it went like. Maybe 71 or 72% for Donald Trump. My county did, I grew up in, I should say. Mm-hmm. So very, very red, very conservative part of a state. And I grew up in a fundamentalist Baptist church. Fundamentalist would be their term, not. My pejorative, like, uh oh.

They would say independent, fundamental King James, only that kind of Bible church. Yeah. It's interesting, uh, I've been thinking a lot lately that I didn't stay a fundamentalist Baptist, but I loved growing up with the King James Bible In hindsight, as like a writer, as someone who does things with words, I'm very grateful for that.

So I grew up in a conservative church, in a very conservative part of Pennsylvania and. I went to a small evangelical [00:03:00] liberal arts college, Grove City College, but then for graduate school I was accepted into a PhD program at Georgetown, and that really, I have to say in terms of my trajectory towards the Catholic church, I grew up in such an.

anti-Catholic context, you know, like that kind of fundamentalism was the antichrist. If it wasn't the pope, the Pope would somehow be helping the antichrist kind of, you know, handmade into the antichrist, very anti-Catholic. And so I show up at Georgetown and I start being charmed by all these very smart, interesting Catholics.

I was meeting, um,

Julia: Jesuits will do that for you, for you.

Matt: I know I now realize I was living a bit of a cliché in some ways. Yeah. Uh, yeah, yeah. But, but you know, there is that kind of cliché of the. Learned urbane Jesuit great cocktail party conversations. And there was a Jesuit at Georgetown, father Fields, who was a theology professor.

He would have me over to the Jesuit residence and we'd have gin and tonics and overlook the Potomac, and he'd kind of. [00:04:00] Not grill me on theology. He was not proselytizing, but he was also not indifferent. Ah-huh. I should put it

that way. So we had many long conversations that, you know, looking back were very influential on me.

I think we didn't drink at all growing up in this Baptist church. So first, you know, it was like, oh we can, you know, Catholics can drink. That was one draw for me. Yeah. From there, you know, I taught. At the University of Virginia for a few years. Eventually moved to New York to do a kind of left academia, never finished my PhD.

Mm. And it was in New York. I've lived in New York now for 12 years, I think, actually. Okay. Uhhuh. It was in New York where I. Was received into the Catholic Church. Mm. And of course, Commonwealth's based in New York. Yeah. So really my life as a Catholic, I'm happy to fill in any of those details along the way.

Yeah. But it was a long journey, you know, I was in my thirties. Yeah. And it'll be 10 years this fall. Okay. Uh, but so my life as a Catholic is very, it's inextricable for my time in New York. That's an important [00:05:00] part of the story because there's so many wonderful. Parishes and Catholic churches here in ministries.

Mm. It was very good for me in, in that sense. And, uh, of course being a relatively new Catholic at Commonweal, that was a, a kind of RCIA mega Plus or something, you know. You know, a lunch table conversations. Yeah, editorial meetings. That was an incredible. Kind of part of becoming Catholic was being received into the church and then working at this a hundred year old magazine.

Mm. Its archives alone were kind of education. Yeah. But then the conversations with colleagues and, you know, people I edited. I, I mentioned, you know Rita Ferone? Yeah. Dorothy Fort and Barry, your producer's wife. You know, I edited her and so yeah, I had met so many wonderful Catholics too through Commonweal, and it's really hard for me to.

Kind of even imagine my life as a Catholic, apart from Commonweal and New York City and the friends I've made. Yeah. Kind of through both.

Julia: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me. And you know what? I am feeling a little resonance because I grew up in rural Iowa and also a [00:06:00] pretty conservative area and have a lot of family there still.

And that place is so, so sacred to me. Going to the small little Catholic parish in my home community, it wasn't even in the same town. I was being presented

this very narrow picture of what Catholic was. Mm-hmm. Right? And I had to leave that town to really come to know the broadness of the church, the true universality of Catholicism, and dive deeper into the tradition in the Catholic social teaching principles.

So experiencing like the intercultural expression of liturgy. And some of that I could also experience in Chicago, like once I lived there eventually. Uhhuh. So Uhhuh, the urban church is so different than the rural church. Mm-hmm. And I think for myself, that expression, that diversity helped me to feel more at home.

Like, oh, I, I fit here. I am beloved, and this is where I belong. Is that kind of what you're saying too about connecting your own experience to New York City and the [00:07:00] broadness of like the tradition that you came to know through Commonweal and working there?

Matt: As you were talking, I was thinking of Molly Wilson O'Reilly, another, uh, great Catholic writer who I mm-hmm.

Worked with at Commonweal. And one time we were having like a discussion about what Commonweal's mission is, you know? Mm-hmm. And often commonwealth's labeled liberal versus conservative. Like first things as conservative, Commonweal's liberal. And I don't really like using those political categories for the church.

Julia: Me neither. And where I'm,

Matt: and where I'm going with this is the way Molly, I don't think she'd mind me repeating this. She said at some level, you know. One thing we're trying to do at Commonweal is remind people of the breadth of the Catholic tradition. Yeah. There's so many different strains, right? Of spirituality.

Dominican, Franciscan. Yeah. Ignatian. The richness of Catholic social teaching that you mentioned, right? Like mm-hmm. Sometimes the Catholic church has presented mostly is this narrow list, right, of things you can't do and theological imperatives that are, you know, more important than others and yeah, it's kind of like when I became [00:08:00] Catholic.

It was not the narrowness of the church that appealed to me, but realizing the riches of the church historically. Again, as I was mentioning in terms of spirituality of augustinians, like a new Pope, right? Like there's so many different intellectual and spiritual aspects of the church or elements of the tradition for me.

I became Catholic in part because I realized whatever questions I had or uncertainties I had, this was the place I was going to work out my salvation with fear and trembling, ah, it had the resources, you know? Um, and I, I just felt like whatever I was going to encounter, experience. In this veil of tears, Catholic Church would be the spiritual home for me and the church who's many different, you know, nooks and crannies, various treasures, spiritual traditions, and so on.

Those would be the resources I would draw on as I made my way through this world.

Julia: You said that you received into the Catholic Church [00:09:00] yet? You know, I'm a Franciscan and so for fra, we, we hold conversion, the value of conversion very dear and central. So I'm gonna continue to use that word. If you don't mind.

I was

Matt: not correcting you by the way. I was just, uh, I just, I, I just said Rita Farone in my ear and I thought I gotta get this in, in case she listens. Yeah.

Julia: So like continual conversion is especially one of the values of the Franciscan tradition and something that St. Francis really emphasized. So. I am always interested in stories of transformation and coming more into oneself and, and more living, more authentically who one a person is in the world.

And so I'm curious if you would call it a conversion when you changed from a conservative. Person to now this public liberal hosting the Know Your Enemy podcast. Right? Yeah. And, and, and like publicly saying, and how did that transformation occur? Whether you call it a conversion or not, I'd love to [00:10:00] hear about that.

Matt: Sure. I mentioned I started as a Fundamental Baptist and I'm Catholic. I. You know, was a young conservative. Mm-hmm. You know, I interned at the Heritage Foundation Oh. Authors of Project 2025. True. And everyone was talking recently, what I say, it was like a young conservative, I, I really was, I was like in the movement.

Mm-hmm. And both my political evolution and my religious both took a long time. It's interesting. I've thought a lot about conversion stories for various reasons. You know, on the podcast, know Your Enemy, we talk about a lot of people who started earlier in the 20th century as communists, right? Oh, and

then they, yeah, they converted and ended up writing for National Review in the 1950s.

You know, the conservative magazine founded by William Buckley Jr. In 1955. Right? So it's like. Even just professionally, what I tend to write and talk about conversions a big part of it. I doubt myself as like a trustful narrator sometimes, you know? Mm-hmm. We smooth out stories in hindsight. Yeah. The, the rougher parts maybe drop out, so I never like to [00:11:00] truncate these stories, but I often say that those two conversions, they happen in tandem, but one wasn't because of the other.

They were kind of like mutually reinforcing. It was the fall of 2015 that I was received into the church, and that was very early in the Francis Papacy. Yeah. And so I did feel like even though it wasn't because of becoming Catholic or Pope Francis that I believed any of these things, it was still. Very, you know, important and I feel like reinforcing to have someone like Francis release Lato Sea.

Yeah. You know, and take seriously the care of our common home and even the urban parish I went to on the Upper West Side, this will, you know, upset some Catholics, but I was a eucharistic minister, uh, elector and occasional extraordinary minister. And I do remember, like right after. Donald Trump was elected.

I'm not here to bash Donald Trump. I'm just saying, you know, like yeah, the 10 years I've been, or [00:12:00] Catholic have been kind of like the 10 years Donald Trump has been in our public life and you know, his sparring with Pope Francis, like, you know, that's all in the mix. But I do remember November, 2016, the first.

Mass I went to after Trump was elected and I was a eucharistic minister, and at this parish, this urban parish in Manhattan, you know, it was literally every race and ethnicity. People without papers. I'm sure you know, people in wheelchairs. Mm-hmm. Like distributing the host to them as they came up one after another.

So many different kinds of people. There was, uh, to me beyond like explicit theology or like social teaching or whatever it was, this. Affirmation of being joined together in the body of Christ with people radically different than me in terms of where they were coming from and their life experiences.

But here we were, all of us. This mass when so many of us were worried, you know, what was gonna happen? People were, you know, very surprised and

shocked. And that was just a [00:13:00] extremely meaningful kind of moment for me to just, you know, realize, especially in an urban parish like that, you know, Spanish language services, you know, soup kitchens in the morning, everything going on.

It just felt like there was a way in which the Catholic church. I loved what it contained, and I love that it united not just like, you know, vertically, but like horizontally too in the Eucharist. Being joined in a special way to these people who I didn't know, well, were different than me, but we were a part of this church and encountering Jesus together.

Julia: Amen. You're describing one of the a hundred things I love about the Eucharist.

Matt: Yes.

Julia: And what you're. Touching on here is bringing another topic I'd really like to explore. The challenge of building unity when there's so much polarity, when division is real. Mm-hmm. And I'm curious if you have some thoughts about [00:14:00] the beauty of diversity, the beauty of unity, and what is actually realistic in the United.

States in our context at this time, you know, we've got this urban rural divide. We have the division obviously between um, the political polls as well, and there is division in the church too. So what sort of unity can we foster? How do we build it? I know that. Some of what I desire is probably heaven on earth stuff, right?

Matt: Uhhuh.

Julia: But I would love to hear your takes on what's realistic and how do we get there.

Matt: I was just mentioning the breadth of the Catholic church, uh, and that's both like an opportunity and a challenge you might say. Uh, here comes everybody. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Like Catholic, literally, you know? Yeah. Trying to encompass something universal.

You know, I've thought about this a lot too, in the context of. The attacks on Pope Francis during his papacy. We don't need to, you know, re-litigate or revisit all the controversies [00:15:00] of the Francis Papacy.

Julia: They can listen to your episode about that, right? Yes, yes. I know your enemy.

Matt: Uh, but one thing I would, I, I have thought about and I, I will admit.

I'm not the biggest fan of JD Vance.

Julia: I'm not either. I'll admit that too. Yes. Yeah. Um,

Matt: I'll pray for him. Yeah. You know, there was this kind of controversy over the order of love. What are our obligations, you know, to people like. In a literal physical sense closer to us versus refugees halfway around the world or people who might, you know, get PEPFAR funding, HIV Prevention and treatment in Africa.

Right. These places where Americans, we send some of our tax dollars. Yeah. You know, hopefully to build the common good or, you know, help people. There ended up being this letter kind of issued by Francis or, or you know, like the Vatican that kind of smacked down JD Vancey. His theological explanation for this Order of love concept was not exactly right.

Yeah. Uh, and but, and where I'm going with this is not to just kind of attack JD [00:16:00] Vancey to say what I noticed in that exchange was a kind of lack of humility. Before the possibility that the Vicar of Christ on Earth could teach us something about our obligations to another. Pope Francis was the only Pope I knew as a Catholic until his death this spring, and I, I guess I would say I.

He was a pope I loved in a certain kind of way.

Julia: Yeah, me too.

Matt: There will be popes. I'm sure that I don't love as much and that's fine, but I would hope that I have a posture of teachability as I relate to the man on St. Peter's chair. Right. There really is a sense in which our unity is Catholics. Does.

Relate to the Pope, right? Or you know, we are in all in communion with the Pope. He's kind of a source of visible unity in a way. What I would hope is that even if there's a Pope who's teachings really challenged me that I struggle with, I would try to [00:17:00] begin by thinking, what is this person trying to teach me?

Mm-hmm. What is the Holy Father trying to convey to us? And even if as I work through that, I end up. Not a green all the way or kind of having some, how should I put it? Uh, a conscientious objection of some kind, even know if that's the case. I hope I start from a posture of humility and being teachable.

That's kind of a long-winded way to get at your question, but I think that's a start, and that's what struck me the most in some of the controversies about Francis. Not that people disagreed with him, not that people criticized him, but it seemed like almost like a dismissal out of hand. That this guy Bergoglio?

Yeah. The Sour Puss Jesuit from Argentina. Right. Who you know has, uh, these radical plans to kind of like upend church teaching. It's like, if that's your starting premise about the Pope, it's very hard to have real meaningful conversations when the premises are. The Pope, you know, the Pope doesn't have much to teach me really like as a Catholic.

I [00:18:00] think in terms of having specifically Catholic conversations and dialogue where our starting points are, those could be examined. Uh, I think and, and just kind of thinking about our posture towards the church and what it teaches, but also each other.

Julia: You know what I'm hearing there that I think I'd like to name and see if you have more to share about is.

Well, at least I'm connecting it to the impacts of cancel culture. We are in the midst of a cultural dynamic of like people. Taking on identities without humility and just like, Nope, this is who I am and this is what that type of person believes and thinks. So I'm not even interested in your point of view.

If you're not in the same camp as me, and I'm only gonna therefore consume. Thoughts and ideas that align with my thinking. You know, it, it kind of goes back to me for like the value of conversion again and having an open mind and an open heart. And if you're open to [00:19:00] changing, uh, openness is required. An openness to the other, an openness to that transformation that.

The Holy Spirit gives us as a gift, as a grace when, when we are open to it. And that means that we're all works in progress here. We're learning we, we have a lot of growth to do. So. What is the influence of cancel culture in this division? And how are we as modern Christians, I'm gonna even go broader than the Catholic church here, knowing we have an ecumenical audience.

Like how are we supposed to be? Promoting and building up this unity that is arguably central to our faith.

Matt: You know, cancel culture. I mean, that's a whole topic, uh, you know. Right. But I would say, how I relate it to this discussion would be something the, there's the great line from Alexander Zenin, kind of Soviet dissident writer, intellectual novelist.

There's a line of his where he says the line between good and evil. It doesn't run between countries or between races or between. Other [00:20:00] categories you could put in there, Uhhuh. The line between good and evil runs through every human heart. Oh. And so I think one of the glories of the Christian tradition is its extremely complex view of human beings.

Yeah. Right. We're neither all goods nor all bad, right? Yeah. Neither beast nor angel, body and soul. Right. We're complex human beings. Yeah. And I think one thing that cancel culture does is it reduces that complexity. The one thing you've said, the one thing you've done that you're then tarred with forever, right?

Yeah. This is one reason why Pope Francis', emphasis on mercy was so extraordinarily meaningful to me, because to me, you know, there's, there's obviously it's challenges to being a Christian, a Catholic right now, but I also would say there's never been a better time to be Catholic or Christian than right now.

'cause it means so much right now. There's a quote from Pope Francis that. I've, I've thought about a lot in this context, and he says, in a world [00:21:00] that quote, leave so many men and women behind, is it races on breathlessly and aimlessly. We need the oxygen of this gratuitous and life giving love. We thirst for mercy and no technology can quench that thirst.

We seek a love that endures beyond momentary pleasures. A safe harbor where we can end our restless wanderings an infinite. Embrace that forgives and reconciles. And I really truly believe that the world is absolutely starving for that life-giving mercy. Yeah. And love that Pope Francis is describing.

And when we offer that to the world, like I would hope, that's how people think of us as Christians. Right? That they are treated by us differently than anyone else. Yeah. Right. That message of mercy. One reason kind of the debates in the controversies in the church I find so frustrating is we argue about those things.

We have disputes about them. We spill [00:22:00] ink, digital or otherwise on it. Yeah. And yet the thing we have that could meet the world's need in the most extraordinary way right now, we keep that tucked away hidden under a bushel, you might say. Right? The infinite unearned. Grace of God, the mercy of God. You know, I think when it comes to cancel culture, whatever else you might say about it, I do think the Christian message of mercy is a counterpoint to that or something that should be in the conversation.

Mm-hmm. And I think. I'm coming off as way too much of a Francis fanboy here. I I've, I've just been thinking about him a lot though. Yeah. And I, and I, I

Julia: miss him.

Matt: Yeah. And so many of his, you know, words as Pope resonated with me. And the one here that I, I also wanna draw in is his line. That is he once put you, the other is not a statistic or a number.

The other has a face. The U is always a real presence, a person to take care of, and one of the things, Francis, you know, he always was [00:23:00] going on and on about ideology, right? This is an ideological this and ideological that, you know, ideology's the problem in this or that situation. You know, he was always critiquing ideology.

What I realized eventually was ideology is a system. Hmm. Right. A total system that, because it is kind of like a premise, not something you kind of start with and not necessarily something you like encounter or learn along the way. It's just a. This is the ideology and this is gonna control how I see reality.

Yeah. For Francis ideology is what keeps us from seeing the reality of the suffering person standing right across from us, sitting there having coffee with us. It's ideology that keeps us from seeing that person in all their complexity. The cancelable thing they said, right? But also the mercy that we know God can give them.

It's what keeps us from seeing the reality of the suffering person. How, what category do we put them in to make their suffering invisible to us? Yeah. I mean, think about the [00:24:00] dehumanization, a Palestinian people in Gaza. I mean, I have very strong, you know, views on that issue. Even if you disagree, uh, if we had a conversation about it and we disagreed putting people like Palestinians in a kind of box that says they're suffering, they brought it upon themselves, almost literally to hell with them.

Giving ourselves excuses to render some people's suffering unworthy of our attention and efforts to reduce. Mm-hmm. You know, any way we can just kind of avoid, this is like a very human thing, right? What can I do to avoid grappling with. The difficult situation this person is in, one of them is, you know, ideology says, well, they're on the wrong side of this, that, or the other thing, so I can dismiss them, right?

Yeah. Or they've committed this sin, they've said this thing, I can dismiss them. We give ourselves excuses to dismiss people, to not see them, not see the reality of their lives. And that's just something I don't think we're permitted as Christians.

Julia: I mean, basically what you're [00:25:00] talking about is the unity is built up.

If we're truly loving, 'cause love is unity and love is relationality. And so to be in relationship and not to be distancing ourselves, dismissing ourselves, it requires this openness again. But it's, it's love. Is that what you're saying? Am I hearing that right? Really it's the Christian charity. It's,

Matt: isn't

Julia: it?

Matt: I think, you know, one of the things I, I do love about the Catholic Church is unity in diversity. Meaning unity is not uniformity. Yes. Right. And so there is a way in which I think, especially right now, just the way we live now, living in a place like New York City, the diversity I was talking about experience at, at mass, at the Eucharist, there's no way you can kind of.

Hammer all those different people into one uniform tidy category or box, right? Yeah. One of the things the Catholic church [00:26:00] can offer the world, I, we don't do a very good job of it, I think, but something like living in the tension of unity in diversity, uh, experiencing unity is not uniformity, but a kind of relationship we're in.

This is kinda like the field hospital idea. It's kind of like, yeah. Come on, everybody. Come in, come in, come in. Let's bind up our wounds. Mm. Heal as much as we can and then we'll sort out the rest of the stuff. You know,

Julia: we actually need each other. Yeah. Right. Yeah. All of us are likely to be a, if we're really living the gospel, we're all likely to be oppressed and rejected at some point in our life.

We're gonna be persecuted and we actually need people to show up and care for us to stand in solidarity with us. At least this is how I read the gospel, the, the Christian playbook. Right? It is this formula that we have built into our faith of our beliefs is like solidarity charity, because we're all gonna need it at [00:27:00] some point.

Yeah.

Matt: Sometimes it can seem like, you know, the liberal Catholics are wishy-washy. I'm okay. You're okay. That is not my approach at all because when I'm talking about mercy, I think it cuts against both right and left for the conservatives. Mercies too open-ended. Wild. You know, uncontrollable. You can't just give everybody mercy, can you?

Well, yes you can, right? But also I think for some more left or liberal. Leaning Catholics mercy. It's too existential, right? It's like mercy comes to us because we are sinners who have failed and that's not a message. Sometimes some versions of like liberal Christianity, that's not the emphasis all the time, right?

I'm not saying that to attack anyone. I'm just saying mercy kind of cuts against both left and right and it cuts through ideology as, as Francis would say. You're offering mercy to the concrete person there in front of you in their situation, not offering mercy to the [00:28:00] ideal picture you've drawn of the person you want to help in your head.

Right,

Julia: right, right. Your comfort zones or something. Yeah. What feels good? So what does relationship look like with those who are part of your conservative rural roots now that you're so far flung from them? Those origins?

Matt: Yeah, it's been difficult. Um, I mean, especially with family. Mm-hmm. Not even like, okay, I disagree with my more conservative parents about this or that issue.

After living in New York City for a few years, there was a, a trip home I took to Central PA where I realized I really had been in New York for a while because I step off the train, my parents pick me up and we go to some restaurant and I'm

just like. Everyone here this, and people know this is not how I normally think and talk, but I was like, everyone here is white.

You know? Yeah, yeah. And kind of like dresses a certain way. It's

Julia: kind of jarring.

Matt: Yeah. Like I, I realized [00:29:00] that. Like aesthetically where I grew up now stood out to me in a certain way because it was so different. Just kind of like looking around than what I experienced in New York. So I would say, you know, apart from particular issues, there's just kind of like a divide of experience.

Uhhuh, neither of my parents went to college, neither of my parents have ever been on a plane. You know, now I, I do spend about a month or two every year in Rome. I escape the New York City winter,

Julia: and, uh, what a great place to go.

Matt: I know, I, I, we can talk about Rome now if you want. Yeah. Like I really have fallen in love with Rome.

I love my parents. They're great parents, but sometimes I'm talking to them about, you know, something I'm doing in Rome and. It's just totally beyond their experience of the world. Mm-hmm. Right? They've never been on a plane, let alone flying to, you know, one of the great cities of the world and yeah.

Standing in the Pantheon or something, that's not good or bad. It's just like a divide based on very different experiences. [00:30:00] And over time those experiences really do shape who you are. Like they come to shape your values and just your perception of the world. And so, uh, that's to me, I think one of the.

More difficult things is trying to find not common ground in terms of things we agree upon, but almost like epistemologically. Are we starting from the same point? Like are we operating from the same set of. You know, basic facts, experiences, et cetera about the world. You can argue about, again, particular issues, policies, whatever, all you want.

The more interesting problem is relating to people who have very different experiences than you, and can you find some kind of language. That lets you talk about the thing you disagree about even. Does that make sense? Like

mm-hmm. Before you can agree about anything else, you have to agree about kind of the set of facts and premises and like, what is the world we're dealing with and talking about here.

The differences at that level, I think are more kind of, you know, more [00:31:00] important than, you know, the, the particular disagreements that might come down the line.

Julia: Yeah. So is that what your parents and you do when you're together is like just

Matt: No, we try not to talk about politics at all. Oh, okay. There's a vow of silence.

Yeah. It has come out of some experiences. Yeah. I've said this story once or twice publicly. It involves my father, my dad, and I, uh, we were talking on the phone, this is before the November, 2020 election. Somehow we got into it in this conversation. I think the proximity to the election and. We started kind of having it out a bit and all of a sudden click, my dad hung up on me.

Oh. And he called me back, you know? Minutes later, apologizing profusely. I was shocked 'cause it was so outta character for him. Oh, right. Again, you know, we didn't linger on it. He apologized right away. It was really unexpected, like I said, out of character. But I think that kind of gets it where we're at right [00:32:00] now in this country when Yeah.

When it comes to talking about politics, my relationship. To my parents is significantly more important to me than any political cause in, in some ways, you know, the kind of articles we read every Thanksgiving, right? How to have a conversation with your Trump voting uncle, that kind of thing. Uhhuh Uhhuh.

Maybe we just don't have to talk about politics at the Thanksgiving table and can enjoy each other's company and talk about other things. Yeah, and like, I don't think that's cowardly. I don't think it's shirking of obligation or responsibility or something like that. When you do change people's minds, if that ever comes, I think it comes from being in relationship with them for years.

Mm-hmm. Right. It's, it's not like, oh, you got into this argument at the dinner table and you delivered this, you know, knock out this, you know, this, this argument that could not be, you know, countered. Right, right, right, right. It's more like the slow effect you have on someone over time. Modeling may be a

different way of being in the world, [00:33:00] loving them in a way maybe they haven't loved before.

And maybe somewhere down the line, your views end up converging more, not because it's what your aim was all along, but because those things follow from as you were getting at earlier. Solidarity and relationship, the relationship has to come first. And so if you love and care about people like I do, my parents, my relationship.

With them comes prior to any arguments or differences we might have.

Julia: I'll speak from, you know, my perspective, like I have a. Pretty diverse family, but my mom is from a large family, lots of siblings, and so I have a ton of cousins. And growing up, we were the one Catholic family. Like my mom stepped away, took the risk, married the Catholic from Boston, we're rural Iowans, right?

Matt: Uhhuh.

Julia: But we grew up in the Iowa context around all these Protestant folks and I, mm-hmm. I struggled with my Christian identity in the sense of like, this is confusing [00:34:00] because I'm hearing so many mixed messages about what it means to be a Christian. And things were sort of crystallizing for me as I got older.

And I was just like, well, Jesus just says to love the poor and like if we're loving them, we're not gonna judge them and we're just gonna help them. Mm-hmm. Right. And so like I just kind of gradually connected my own dots and like developed my own. Political leanings or whatever, but I am more rooted in my Catholic identity and my identity as a woman and than I am in my rural roots, than I am in, like, I'm really passionate about social justice and I, I want all wars to end and I'm taking, I'm serious about that, right?

What feels really messy for me in this time. Because now my cousins, my aunts and uncles are on Facebook and they're all sharing their opinions. So we're, we're in this new era of how we're in relationship with each other.

Matt: And

Julia: in the nineties it was like we were all [00:35:00] closeted about our political opinions, and now we're siloed and we're just like, occasionally we

have a family gathering, but we're superficial and short, like we're just gonna be for two hours and have a picnic and be on your way.

Yet I love. And care for my family, and I want them to maintain relationship with me and I want them to know I love and care for them. And we're hearing all these messages of like, no, let's just dismiss each other. And there's a sense, uh, a perception of judgment, right? Sometimes. Mm-hmm. And that can get in the way of, of authentic intimacy, solidarity, real charity for one another.

I mean, I mean, this is the messiness for me of, of this time, of being a person of faith. In the United States of America in 2025 is like when we're really called to love our neighbor and tend to them, and that includes our family who might vote differently than us. We can't avoid the hard stuff [00:36:00] either, right?

It's like we have to be true and we have to be authentic, and yet it's the centering of the relationship and the love. The Christian virtues in general, like mercy, like you're talking about over this pride and this ego and this, this sense of like, no, I know what I'm talking about. Listen to me.

Matt: Yeah. It is tricky because I don't want to give anyone the impression that some of what we're experiencing now in the United States and around the world, but especially here in the United States, the issues we're dealing with things like, you know, masked agents.

Essentially kidnapping people off the streets because they, they look Hispanic and throwing them in a van. Those are things that we cannot ignore, I think as, as Christians and people of conscience. Right. Right. There are things we will be required to speak up on and about. Yeah.

Julia: Yeah.

Matt: On the other hand, you know, I do think one of the things that really, [00:37:00] it really bothers me, and it's quite common these days, is something like.

The 2024 election happens in a state that voted for Trump health insurance gets taken away. Mm-hmm. Or, you know, something happens in, you know, a place that supported Trump and people like us, liberals, you could, you know, whatever, you know, people who normally view themselves as kind of woken, enlightened even Yeah.

Will, will say, well, you know, screw around and find out. Right. Like, they brought this on themselves like you. Didn't want this to happen. Well, he shouldn't have voted for Trump. And it's like, okay, well first of all, there are lots of people in those states, you know, whose lives are in

Julia: danger. Yeah. Like Right.

And we care about their lives. Yeah. And like you're saying, we cannot otherwise them. Right. They, they are still are other humans who deserve our love and respect are and deserve to be listened to too. Right. And we can't say, oh, this is, they voted for this, this is what they deserve. No.

Matt: Yeah. I, I hate that sentiment.

Right. Like, and it's [00:38:00] exactly, it's, it's very common, including from people who would not view themselves as unwoke, nasty Trump people. Right, right. Good enlightened liberals say this kind of thing.

Julia: They do.

Matt: I just go back to what I was saying earlier about Pope Francis, right? Every person has a face.

They're not a statistic or a number. I guess the tension. That I'm trying to point to here is politics can be, the thing often is the thing that keeps us from seeing this the other, in all their humanity and complexity, and it gives us excuses to put them in a box or in a category that's, I don't need to care about them.

They're suffering. They brought it upon themselves, right? Mm-hmm. Politics does that to us, but politics also is the arena in which we try to live. Justly together to work out what that means. So that's attention. That there's no single answer for it. You know, the tension must be leaned into and live through, not explained away with an answer ahead of [00:39:00] time, but it really is the case.

I think that part of the tension of this moment is politics is the thing that makes us not see the other as a real human being, as a brother and sister in Christ, but it's also the place where we deliberate about. Again, how to live together justly and what we owe each other. Yeah. I don't want anyone to think I'm giving this like anti-political message here.

I'm extremely political. I make my living, writing and talking about politics, but I'm just saying that's the tension for me. Yeah, and I think that's one thing. Catholics should develop a, you know, a repertoire of, you know, yeah. Living intention because it's a cliché, but Catholicism is a both and Yes. Not an either or kind of faith.

And so I think we are particularly given how the church is global when Francis Stein and then with the, uh, conclave, it was wild and wonderful to see. How many different kinds of Catholics, right. Were in St. Peters Square or Oh yeah. Or following along as it was [00:40:00] happening. Mm-hmm. That is our church. We cannot avoid these kinds of dilemmas because I think as Catholics, you know.

Part of our communion, part of the people, you know, in our church, very different people from all over the world. Right. I'm always struck by sometimes with political discussions in the church or like church policy, like, yes, in this country the church's relationship to the police or government is very different than in this or that other country.

Mm-hmm. Where there's so many complexities and I think that's actually, it's not a problem, it's a gift. And I think that's one of the things we can offer the world. These days ideally would be, yes, we are a both and people, and this moment, these times we're living through really require us to, you know, figure out what that means and hold intention.

Yes. There can be people who believe things you absolutely hate, and yet we are not given the option of dismissing them.

Julia: That's right.

Matt: We're not, we're not allowed to. [00:41:00] No. You know? Right. Yeah. We have to love them. That's actually the mission here.

Julia: Yeah. So. Mission and ministry. Right. And as it relates to messiness, do you understand that your mission is to be like this public scholar, thinker, writer, and, you know, communicator is, is that the call?

Did you discern that and feel that somehow? And what's the. The meaning of that for you?

Matt: Well, since I was young, like I loved writing, it was what I was drawn toward. It's not like I grew up wanting to be a podcaster 'cause those things

didn't exist then. But I will say unexpectedly, especially since the podcast has its audience, has grown and all different kinds of people listened to it over the six years.

My co-host, Sam Ebell, my great friend over time. I've talked more about, I mean, almost by necessity. Sam and I both have talked more about our lives, and for me, I mean, I'm extremely humbled by this and feel very [00:42:00] inadequate to it, but I have been. Totally stunned by the number of people who write to me with some kind of spiritual question after, you know, listening to the podcast because often they grew up like me, conservative somehow in a very conservative, rigid church.

They feel burned by it. So they kind of left the church and now as an adult, maybe they got married and have kids now, or they just have this spiritual tug that they can't ignore anymore. Mm-hmm. And enough time has passed, you know, where the bad experiences they had of the church, Catholic or otherwise, they're kind of healing enough that they're exploring religiously and spiritually now.

And there is a way in which the podcast, much to my surprise, has become almost a kind of ministry in some ways. Mm. I mean, I'm a gay Catholic. I've been open about that and I can honestly say probably once a month I get an email from a gay, lesbian, trans Christian who clearly loves the [00:43:00] Lord Yeah. And has the spiritual hunger and they're just trying to navigate an institutional context that is not always friendly to them with their, you know, deep desire to be a part of the church and to encounter Jesus There.

I don't have good answers for people, you know? Uh, I really don't. Yeah. But, but I've just, I guess I've just been surprised by being open about my own spiritual life, talking about the things I care about. If you listen to our episode about Pope Francis, you know, like, this is really, these are the things I care the most about.

Julia: Yeah.

Matt: I would just say. Without getting up on a soapbox or anything.

Julia: Oh, you can hear? Yeah.

Matt: Okay. Well, I'll just say it's, it's just really, really, there's so many wounded people out there who have been wounded by the church. Even. It's

been a reminder to me that, you know, you encounter someone and they yell at you.

They cut you off in traffic button line at the store. [00:44:00] I don't know, whatever it might be. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. You know, someone you're, you're ready to flip out on. Yeah. Uh, or whatever. You don't know what's going on in their life. Scratch the surface of anyone's life, and there are wounds and suffering and problems that you do not know about.

I think sometimes, you know, if I were to like, have an audience with the pope since he speaks English, you know, we could have a real conversation. Yeah. I, I actually would love to bring me along,

Julia: buddy.

Matt: I will. Uh, I actually would love to. Print out some of these emails I've gotten from gay, lesbian, trans, queer Catholics of different kinds.

Mm-hmm. I was once talking to a very important American prelate, I'll just say he, he had a red hat. Aha. And I found myself at a cocktail hour one-on-one with this cardinal and. I was talking to, to him about being gay, he said, would you say the church has a kind of voyeuristic approach to your life, uh, as a [00:45:00] gay Catholic?

Meaning it's all about sex, right? Like the only thing to know about queer people is their sexual habits. And I said, yes, that is the focus. And I said, what I would want to express to you is that being gay isn't about sex. It's about love. I've always kind of taken the opportunity to say that to important Catholics.

You know when I can, but when I say, like, if I met with a Pope, I, I would wanna print out some of these notes and emails I've gotten because I wanna say, do you know one thing they did not mention to me once? Sex, these are people right, who have the spiritual hunger. They don't know what to do with it. In the context of the Catholic Church right now, and it's really not about sex.

That's not their main concern. That's not what they're writing to me about. I'm not saying sexual ethics aren't important or something I'm saying when we put people in these boxes, as we've been saying, when we use ideologies, not really see the person there. I think [00:46:00] the experience of doing this podcast.

Having it turn into, in some ways, a ministry of sorts. It's been just a reminder of these people, you put in a category of bad Catholic, this sin, that sin,

whatever. There's so much more to the reality of their lives. Yeah. I think being open about the reality of my life has made people open up to me about the reality of theirs.

I just wish sometimes I could share. Yeah. You know, some of what people tell me because I've been stunned by it. I, I was not expecting that. And it's one of the reasons when I said earlier, like, there are so many people just hungry for what the church really can offer. Yeah. Right? Yeah. Uh, and it's, and it's kind of a shame that the real people with the real sufferings and real hopes that they have so often we just don't see that because we put them in, again, the kind of ideology in that box, that label.

Julia: I feel like we could talk for hours on end. We [00:47:00] could. We could. There's so much juiciness. We could go deeper. We could go wider, and that is the joy of being in conversation with another Catholic who loves the church and the richness of the tradition and understands like in a similar way, the complexities of this world in this.

Faith in this journey. I just would like to ask, as we conclude here, what for you would you like to say about the messiness of discipleship from your experience and, and what you would want our listeners to leave thinking about and how it applies to their own lives?

Matt: Hmm, say more.

Julia: Yeah. So sometimes I ask my guests to simply, how do you define discipleship or what is messy about living the gospel?

But we've talked so much here about mission, about witness, about relationship, about bridge building, about solidarity and charity, right? And this call to Christian Unity in this really complex and serious time that we're in. When there's. Horrific injustices [00:48:00] occurring, yet we're called to still be in relationship, right?

If you have some like food for thought or some comments, some takes on that dynamic.

Matt: One of the things I love about being Catholic is, and why I was drawn to it was kind of the ritual, right? And the iCal aspects of it. So I wanna read a good quote here, one second. Um, one of my favorite descriptions of ritual comes from the great Catholic short story writer, Andre De Abuse, and he has a story called a father story.

I'll just read his description of going to daily mass. He says, each morning I try. Each morning I fail and know that always I will be a creature who looking at Father Paul and the altar and uttering prayers will be distracted by scrambled eggs, horses, the weather and memories and daydreams of nothing to do with the sacrament I'm about to receive.

I can receive though the Eucharist and also at mass and at other times, moments, and even minutes of contemplation. But I cannot achieve [00:49:00] contemplation as some can. And so having to face and forgive my own failures, I learn from them both the necessity and wonder of ritual. And here's the key line for ritual allows those who cannot wield themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual.

Dancing allows the tongue tied man a ceremony of love. Woo. Isn't that beautiful? That's good. Um, the tongue tied, man. Right? The dancing is the ceremony of love. Yes. That's it. And what I was thinking of, you know, we've been talking so much about how we argue and debate with each other. Yeah. The rituals that are not, our words are not made by our words, but the mm-hmm.

As Elliot said, we are kneeling and offering prayer where prayer has been valid. Right. We are doing the thing that we should do, and I sometimes think the expressions of care and solidarity. Love. We've been talking too much about how we argue about those things. I would say maybe in terms of discipleship and mission, think about, you know, the wordless things, the gifts you [00:50:00] can give someone.

The things you don't have to explain, asking them out for coffee. Uh, having someone over for a meal. Mercy's kind of like treating people how you think they should be treated if they were a good person, right? Yeah. It's treating people as the people we know they can be. Yeah. As the person they were, you know, created to become whatever their talents and gifts are.

In some ways, who treating them gracefully is treat them as if. These gifts and talents were already, you know, cultivated and, and working those out in their lives. Mm. That would be my advice is kind of the wordless gesture or the things you don't have to explain the way you can tell them you love them without getting in a political fight first, you know, before the arguments, before the words.

What gestures and invitations and actions can we take that show people? We care and love about them in a way that does not lead us into temptation of disputation and argument and, you know, political fights. That would be, amen.

So the wordless ritual, I always love that you might be tongue tied, [00:51:00] right?

Yeah. But we still have the ceremonies of love, the things we can do for each other that are beyond words.

Julia: Amen. Yeah. So are you saying for you discipleship. Is messy and the way you navigate the must is to stay committed to a life of prayer.

Matt: Yeah. One of my favorite descriptions of prayer ever is by Simone Va, who said Prayer is a form of attention.

Ah, yes. And I really think when we pray for someone. I mean, kind of related to everything I was just saying, you know, prayer is the, is inextricably bound up with this because when I pray for someone, I am giving my attention, which is the most valuable thing we have to their suffering to the circumstances of their lives.

Yeah. Right. Whatever else you believe about prayer, it is a form of attention. And when we pray for someone, we are giving them our attention, which is the most incredible gift we can give someone in some ways.

Julia: Yeah. [00:52:00] Well, thank you, Matt, for this time that we've been able to pray together. Then, in a way, I just wanna carve out a little space here for you to share with our audience anything you wanna say about how they can support you and your ministry of paying attention.

Matt: Well, uh, I am the co-host of Know Your Enemy and we do have a Patreon. So before you sign up, before you subscribe, feel free to listen to, you know, so a few episodes. Julia, you did mention the episode on Pope Francis. Mm-hmm. We did after he passed, which might not be a bad place to start if you subscribe and can get access to all of our episodes.

A couple Easters ago I did a kind of Lent series and I had on Susan Bigelow Reynolds. Mm. A great. Theologian who I edited Commonweal, and she wrote a book on kind of like ritual and solidarity that I really love. Lovely. Nicole Flores wrote a great book on our Lady of Guadalupe in solidarity. Mm. If any of that interests you, check out, know Your Enemy, and my writing's kind of all over the place in various publications.

But, [00:53:00] uh, yes, feel free to look up, know your enemy, look up my writing. If for some reason you enjoy this and you wanna hear more of me. That's how you can find it. Thank

Julia: you, Matt, and thank you again for coming on Message Jesus Business.

Matt: My pleasure.